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Finding the SurPriSe: A Case Study of a Faculty Learning Community

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Abstract

This article details a faculty learning community (FLC) that started in 2009 on the campus of a Midwestern University and has evolved into an interdisciplinary research, teaching and social community of practice and learning called SurPriSe. SurPriSe is an acronym that reflects the interest area of the FLC; Sur for surveillance, Pri for privacy, and Se for security. This case study provides understanding of the social context, the institution and the nature of encouraging established faculty to engage in new research and pedagogical interests that are interdisciplinary.

Keywords: Faculty Learning Community, Surveillance, Privacy, Security

For established faculty, opportunities to support new pedagogy and research interests outside of one's own discipline or school is not easy when governance structures, politics and competing interests makes commitment to such activities difficult to sustain. However, shared scholarly growth can happen through the auspices of a theme-focused faculty learning community. This case study details a faculty learning community (FLC) that started in 2009 on the campus of Oakland University and has evolved into an interdisciplinary research, teaching and social community of practice and learning called SurPriSe. SurPriSe is an acronym that reflects the interest area of the FLC; Sur for surveillance, Pri for privacy, and Se for security. The purpose of this FLC as stated on its dedicated e-space is to "Foster interdisciplinary approaches to understanding surveillance, security and privacy through curricular development and research."

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are groups of people who share information, insight, tools, and experience about a subject or area of common interest (Wenger, 1998). CoPs recognize that tacit

learning occurs as members of a joint enterprise mutually engage in work that has intrinsic meaning to them. CoPs are valuable due to their members' focus on developing their skills and knowledge as well as the high value members place on social interaction amongst themselves. Participants' identity transforms through advancing experiences within a CoP. "Becoming a certain type of person is what gives meaning to learning," (Brotherton, 2011, p. 96). The goals of FLCs are often collaborative endeavors focused on sharing experience to improve pedagogy, advance scholarship and to build friendships. Studies have indicated that FLCs can counter isolation as well as impact an organization's culture and values on learning and working (Admiraal, Ackerman, & de Graaf, 2012; Peckskamp & McLaughlin, 2010; Westheimer, 1999). FLCs are also noted as positive training ground for preparing future faculty members in teaching as well as service (Richlin & Essington, 2004). Hargreaves (1994) notes that collaborative cultures are voluntary as well as task or development-oriented, whereas contrived collegiality is often regulated, compulsory, and used to implement system initiatives (as cited in Linder, Post, & Calabrese, 2012). As recognition of the social context of the University at that time, a published campus climate survey indicated that 13% of the faculty noted that they felt moderately comfortable (based on a unipolar scale) with campus opportunities for learning and growing while overall responded they were not comfortable with the University's recognition for research contributions (Oakland University Climate Survey [OUCS], 2013).

The FLC, SurPriSe, evolved as a community of practice through a commitment to democratic principles of civil engagement. Dewey (1916) explained that individuals "live in a community by virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common" (p. 4). At its inception, the founders of SurPriSe adopted operating principles that defined their shared interests as well as the way in which future differences between members were to be respected. These key principles were: a commitment to interdisciplinary studies, neutrality with regards to whether or not surveillance, privacy and security were good or bad, and fostering dialogue amongst members as an aim of all group activities. Repko, Newell, Szostak (2012) pointed out "Interdisciplinary must embrace a freedom to explore any theory, method or phenomenon that researchers think appropriate to the question being asked" (p.4). By setting up clear organizational principles at the beginning of the group's inception, such as a commitment to open dialogue as well as interdisciplinary, a flexible structure that embraced the heart of academic freedom was accomplished. Or as Lieberman (1994) noted, learning communities defined by democratic practices are communities that include rather than exclude (Jenlink & Jenlink, 2008).

History of SurPriSe

While the author of this article was a participant member of the group who joined shortly after its inception, the founders of SurPriSe were two department chairs from the School of Business Administration and the College of Arts and Sciences. Through a series of informal discussions over coffee, the two recognized their research and teaching interests had considerable commonality. These discussions later evolved into a commitment to start a faculty learning community with a broad articulated focus. Based on their campus leadership roles, both agreed that a strong emphasis on group activities would also nurture social ties for other faculty members.

As longtime members of the faculty community, their ability to recognize and navigate campus culture was pivotal to the startup of this FLC. As Jenlink and Jenlink (2004) write about democratic learning communities: "Cultivating a democratic learning community requires dialogue that is inclusive and honors the voice of each individual. It also requires an open flow of ideas, concern for the dignity and rights of individuals, as well as for the welfare of the others that is guided by realization of the common good" (p. 315). Faculty learning communities, as communities of practice on a college campus, represent a complex and dynamic set of campus relationships that can overlap in organizational roles. Participation in community activities and exchanges of information offer an opportunity for the creation of new knowledge. As an interdisciplinary community of practice, the process of communication offers opportunity for individual members as well as the group itself to create new knowledge. As department chairs, the founders' prior multiyear involvement in shared governance processes on a public university campus sensitized them to the importance of articulating guiding principles so joining members would see that SurPriSe held organizational merits, beyond the shared research subject interests of colleagues situated in two different units on campus.

Academic freedom is often criticized, questioned and even threatened on various campuses (<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/issues/AF/>). However, embracing operating principles acted as a normative support to the community of practice members who were all in various stages of tenure within their own departments. Participation within SurPriSe was sustained through book discussions, sponsored speakers, and a research project that grew out of specific members' interests on closed circuit television surveillance policies.

While some faculty learning communities grow through the use of list serves and announcements, SurPriSe grew through a snowball recruitment process. The founders sat down with identified potential members and then inquired about other potential colleagues. As they sought to grow the membership so diverse disciplinary interests were represented in the organization, two specific questions came up: What will I get out of the experience? What will be expected of me?

In contrast to a community of practice with a high entrance threshold and specialized standards and methods, the founders decided membership activities would be voluntary and low maintenance in respect to administrative duties. For funding resources, the two sought organizational support through the campus's Center for Education Teaching and Learning (CETL) where start up support for faculty learning communities was situated.

Community Building Activities

Funding from CETL is based on a year-to-year renewal basis with an expected report of activities. Activities supported for a campus FLC included speaker fees, conference attendance as well as the purchase of books for sustained book studies. CETL's support of faculty learning communities often ends after one or two years of support. Informal discussions with the CETL director indicate that this is because many campus FLCs dissolve after a short time. While no formalized study of these campus FLCs has taken place, lack of interest, disagreements amongst members and competing interests appear to characterize some of the terminations. According to Wenger (1998), the underlying reason for forming a community of practice is to learn from interactions with people who share similar interests. To listen and share with other members of the community is the

reason for group interactions. If the exchange of information between community members is not appreciated or valued, learning is not occurring. The CoP can disintegrate into a social club or fade away. In contrast, SurPriSe's demonstrated capability of sustaining its community suggests that their deliberate focus on dialogue, engagement in a wide variety of activities, adoption of a policy that allows members to be involved as much or as little as desired, and membership of a relatively large cast of participants (25+ faculty members from 9+ different disciplines) may have been instrumental in its success. Other key factors also contributed to their start up success as well.

Communication

Intergroup communication within the SurPriSe group was both formal and informal. The first year's activities comprised of participating in a weekly afternoon book discussion of Helen Nissenbaum (2009), "Privacy in Context," where different members signed up to facilitate the dialogue. Other books that have since been read include: Solove (2007), "Understanding Privacy," Mayer-Schönberger (2011), "delete: The Virtue of Forgetting" as well as a novel, Baluja (2012), "The Silicon Jungle." Over the years, the challenge to find optimal meeting times has resulted in regular attendance of 10-15 members per session. Periodically, the group discusses potential academic speakers that have the ability to present broad topics to the campus community. In each case, SurPriSe held a private lunch discussion with the speaker followed by a campus talk. FLC members were invited to bring their classes (as well as communicate the speaker's presentation schedule to their own department colleagues). Speakers have included: David Lyon, from the Centre for Surveillance Studies at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada; Mark Andrejevic, of the University of Iowa as well as the University of Queensland; and Helen Nissenbaum from New York University. In this way knowledge explicitly transferred from the SurPriSe FLC to the greater campus community. This allowed learning to disperse beyond what members of the SurPriSe FLC could individually implement.

For many communities of practices, communication of their identity offers challenges. However, since SurPriSe had picked a unique moniker that held meaning to their interdisciplinary interests, they were able to start building campus awareness of their group through the sponsorship of their respected speakers. While Wenger (1998) argues that a domain is the sense of common identity that a CoP must establish to be effective and that it comes with a shared lingo, one often built on exclusivity, SurPriSe's identity is somewhat of a contradiction due to its open and willing approach to include newcomers for many of its activities, namely book readings, speaker sessions, and ongoing research.

After the first year's activities, a campus librarian and member of SurPriSe created an e-space repository for articles, projects, and research links. This repository allowed for all members to access information as well as post new additions. One founder created a list serve of members, and informally as points of interest, such as podcasts, articles, court cases came up, members send out notices to each other. Collectively this added another level of group interaction that reinforced the SurPriSe faculty learning community identity. It also indicated a level of trust and willingness to share information which is essential for a community to practice longevity and success (Cadiz, Sawyer, Griffin, 2009). Interesting enough, no social media was used by the group for communication. Although some members found external articles of interest through social media and have contributed to the SurPriSe e-space with use of this resource.

Research Project

Shortly after the first year, interest in pursuing an interdisciplinary research project started to brew. Through a business school member's connection, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) requested analysis of data regarding the placement of CCTV (Closed circuit television cameras) in the Lansing, Michigan area. At this same time, another member of the group, a graduate student (the author of this article) in the Department of Educational Leadership within the School of Education and Human Services, authored a class paper on college campus CCTV policies and shared it with another group member, who happened to be the faculty representative on the campus's CCTV placement committee. After querying within the group regarding interest in this particular topic and how it relates to security, privacy and safety, six members of the group created an interdisciplinary research focused subgroup and embarked on a national study of college and university CCTV policies. The backgrounds represented by this interdisciplinary group included: a quantitative methods criminologist; an ethnographic police sociologist; a lawyer who taught in the public administrators program; the department chair of the philosophy department; a professor of management information systems with a strong interest in privacy topics as well as the graduate student in educational leadership. Why CCTV? Through conversation, each member recognized both a professional and a personal tie to the shared subject area, which added another lens of perspective to the research topic. It also is a complex topic, well suited to interdisciplinary research (Banner, 2005 as cited in Repko, Newell, Szostak, 2012).

Since open dialogue was one of the originating principles of the larger community of practice, this same tenet proved important as disciplinary perspectives on the topic of CCTV use and policies challenged the research group discussions. Repko, Newell, Szostak (2012) discuss a 10 step process and theory to interdisciplinary research and distill a logical process of identifying the research question, conducting the research, integrating insights, and producing the interdisciplinary understanding. Without the knowledge of the existence of such guidelines, the SurPriSe research group followed a similar strategy with the agreed upon CCTV research project and regular discussion meetings providing the necessary cohesion that pushed the group along the process. Creating a 46 question coding scheme that incorporated the insights of the multiple disciplines was time consuming and arduous at times. Often, "why is this point important?" took up hour long discussions that didn't appear to go anywhere. When group members were absent from discussions, their "place" or view point was held over to the next discussion since their perspective, while not always completely understood or even agreed with, grew to be valued and respected by the other members.

Prior to the onset of the research project, a few faculty members were acquainted with each other, however, none had worked together on research or teaching. As group understanding of the research phenomena grew, there was recognition that certain disciplinary knowledge might help integrate insights. Faculty outside of the research group were consulted and asked to join the larger SurPriSe community. These members acted as evaluators and resources as research findings were periodically discussed.

Dissemination of New Knowledge

With community of practice research: "ACaP (the cumulative absorption rate) is the ability to transform new knowledge into usable knowledge through the processes of assessment:

identification and filtering of valuable information, assimilation: conversion of new knowledge into usable knowledge, and application: using the knowledge” (Cadiz, Sawyer, & Griffin, 2009, p.1036). This triangular definition is useful when recognizing the way in which new knowledge can be disseminated from an interdisciplinary faculty research group, whether it is through the single application of a member writing an article, the group writing a number of joint articles, individual members taking research findings and opportunities into their pedagogy, or as a community of practice, offering a communication model that can influence administrative practices and understanding across campus. For SurPriSe, all three aspects of ACaP were unexpectedly reached—with no such plan being formulated upfront for the group. It also demonstrates how this sustained shared support model contributed to greater productivity by all its members.

Influence on Pedagogy

While the research project was unfolding in the Spring of 2011, one member involved an undergraduate class in the CCTV project and brought the faculty research team into his classroom to lecture, from their disciplinary perspective, on the class theme, “Surveillance in Society.” Students were given guided internet field research experience as they looked for specific CCTV policies through the protocol that the faculty member designed. Likewise, findings and questions that came from the students were taken from that day’s classroom experience directly into the research groups’ weekly meetings. Two of these undergraduate students of this class later went on to sign up for an independent research study with one of the faculty members and were encouraged to present their own research papers at a local student conference. This faculty member along with another FLC member has since then created a second undergraduate course, this one designed for Honors students that looks at these interdisciplinary topics at greater depth.

Conferences, Articles and other forms of knowledge dissemination

The SurPriSe research group has a number of articles in production (in various stages of readiness) that have come out of their collaboration. Two faculty members have produced individual disciplinary works, utilizing other members as peer readers. Other members have started joint articles that have stemmed from the research group’s activities. The research group, as a whole, presented at the 2012 Association for Integrative Studies Conference. Other conference presentations based on the ongoing research has been drafted as well. Likewise, a member of the research group is also the faculty representative on the university’s CCTV administrative committee so knowledge is dispersed within the shared governance structure too. The graduate student produced a dissertation from involvement in the national CCTV research study.

Lessons Learned

A theme that appears in Peckskamp & McLaughlin (2010) compilation of stories regarding faculty and student learning communities is the recognition that potential stagnation and ambiguity are constant shadows that community members must consciously address in their practice together. In some respects, an interdisciplinary faculty learning community has the advantage of no established disciplinary norms whereas inquiry and checking in with each other builds resonating trust. The downside of an interdisciplinary faculty learning community is the challenge of competing interests as well as uncertainty (Banner, 2005 as cited in Repko, Newell, Szostak (2012). One member, going up for full professorship, noted that her own department didn’t hold the journals that the interdisciplinary group might target for writing as important as those journals

within her discipline. At first, the graduate student had difficulty with her own department recognizing the value of the research interest since it was outside of many department faculty domain of expertise. For younger faculty who are concerned about tenure, this can act as a deterrent for involvement unless senior faculty members are willing to mentor and take active roles in encouraging involvement.

The research topic itself, a National study of CCTV policies on college and university campuses, also proved complex as faculty members wrestled with questions and insights and possible new turns in the research agenda as “what are we going to do with this data” grew larger and larger. With no external funding available for structured release time, the group was challenged to dedicate time to produce a comprehensive report. With changing teaching schedules and service duties, establishing a regular meeting time that worked beyond a specific term strained the group dialogue process at times.

The Future

In closing, participating in an interdisciplinary faculty learning community is worthwhile over the long term. It takes dedication, honesty and a commitment to dialogue, qualities that resonate with most people, regardless of their discipline. The research subgroup is still continuing as current articles are brought into fruition. Just as the past growth of SurPriSe was planned and unplanned, its future as a faculty learning community is just that...a SurPriSe.

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